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NAZI WATERLOO, THE BATTLE OF KURSK,  
JULY 1943

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15 March 1972

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15 MARCH 1972

# STUDENT ESSAY

NAZI WATERLOO  
THE BATTLE OF KURSK, JULY 1943

BY

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FIELD ARTILLERY

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NAZI WATERLOO  
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Colonel Peter L. Thorsen  
Field Artillery

American Embassy  
Warsaw, Poland  
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# ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Peter L. Thorsen, COL, FA  
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Since the conclusion of World War II, Russian historians have claimed that the West has never given credit to the Red Army for its significant accomplishments at Kursk. This tremendous battle is almost unknown in Western military history. The essay describes the situation on the Eastern Front in the spring of 1943, plans and preparations, the battle and its aftermath. Where possible, the Russian point of view is taken by use of Soviet references. The Germans violated two principles of war; they lacked surprise and sufficient combat power. The Red Army defeated the Wehrmacht at a place and time chosen by the German and at a scale that dwarfed any other action in Europe during the Second World War. Kursk marked the Nazi Waterloo and turned the tide of the war. Lessons learned, true in either nuclear or conventional war, are offered. Through them, the reader should be able to assess the Red Army but most importantly learn to never underestimate the Soviet.

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## NAZI WATERLOO, THE BATTLE OF KURSK, JULY 1943

### INTRODUCTION

In the August 1971 Soviet Military Review, Colonel V. Sekistov reviewed the book, The Battle of Kursk, by G. Koltunov and B. Solovyov, research associates at the Institute of Military History of the USSR Ministry of Defense. Professor Sekistov's summary repeated the Soviet claim that Western historians have deliberately falsified and minimized the significance of the Red Army's victory at Kursk.

Marshal Chuikov entitled his book on Stalingrad The Beginning of the Road. Marshal Konev labelled Kursk as the swan song of the Wehrmacht's armor; Soviet military historians refer to it as the turn of the tide. What were the details of a battle never before so extensively prepared and between two magnificently equipped, rested and trained forces whose numbers of personnel and arms dwarf any other European action in the Second World War? Their examination will bear out the Soviet claim but more importantly be of value in assessing the Red Army.

To understand the Soviet, our former Ambassador to Moscow, George Kennan, made the observation that to do so must be done not through Western eyes **but** through those of the Soviet himself. For this reason, the Russian point of view is taken to relate the Nazi Waterloo. Soviet historians divide the battle into three phases, the defense and the two counter-offensives at Orel and Belgorod/Kharkov. To limit the scope of the essay, only the first phase, the defense

through 12 July 1943, will be covered.

#### SITUATION

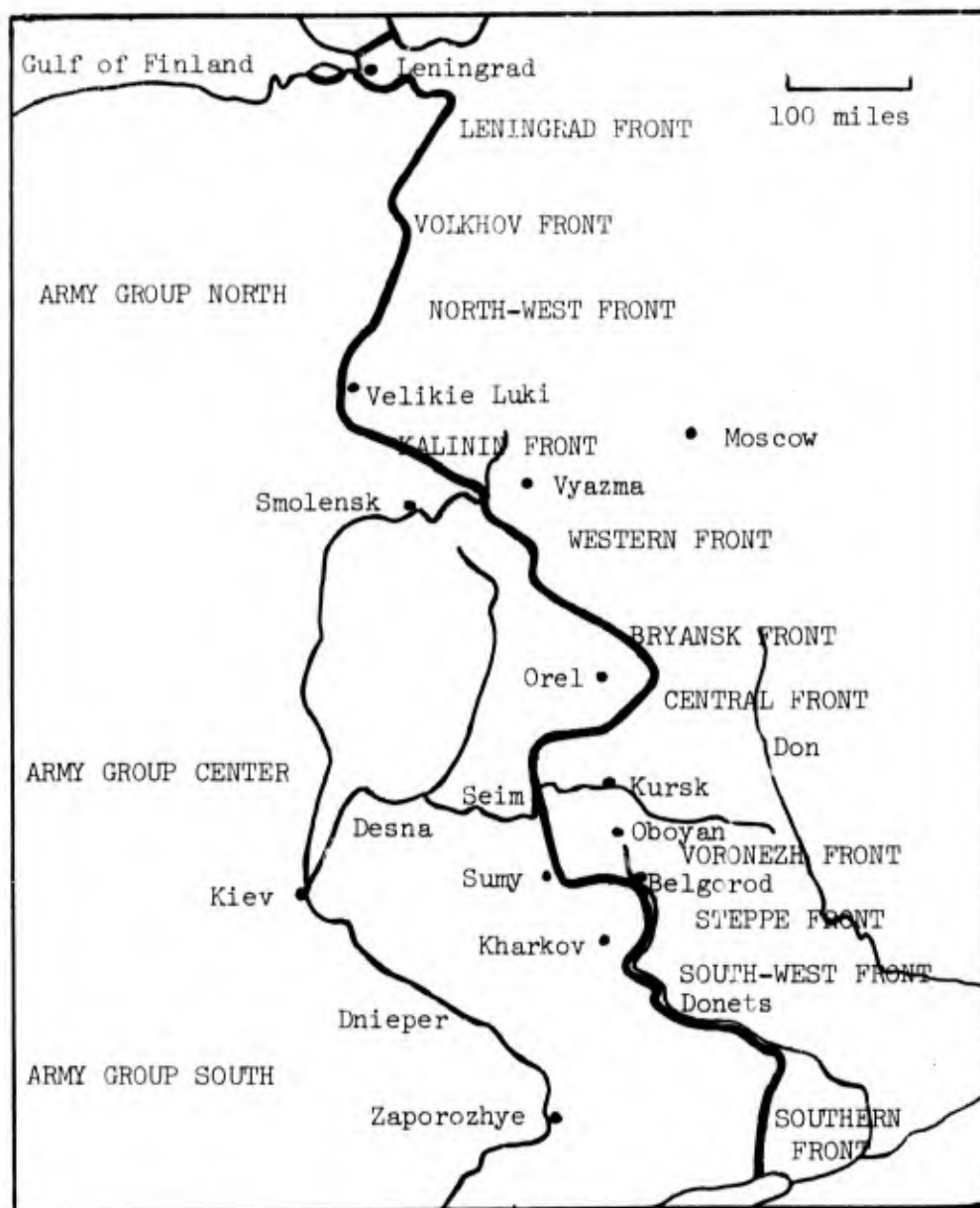
Overextended at Stalingrad and decisively beaten, the Germans had retreated before the 1942-43 Soviet winter offensive. A brilliant operation by Manstein stemmed the tide, recaptured Kharkov and Belgorod, and placed Army Group South on the Donets River, the same line generally held before the 1942 summer offensive. To the north, Army Group Center had borne the brunt of the Russian attack. Its commander, Kluge, recommended to Hitler that his 2d and 2d Panzer Armies pull back to a line along the Desna River because of the threatening bulge east of Orel.

However, Hitler was through retreating and chose in his Operations Order Number 5 of 13 March 1943 to seize the initiative at the end of the winter and spring mud. The operation to eliminate the Kursk salient was given the code name Citadel and, when issued, was part of a sound strategy envisioning a series of limited offensives to consolidate the German defenses.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, it did not consider the facts of life as at the time the front was still fluid. Army Group South's striking force, the 4th Panzer Army, had been on the move for almost a month and its troops were nearly exhausted. Army Group Center's 2d and 2d Panzer Armies were struggling to halt the Russians in the bulge west and northwest of Kursk.

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<sup>1</sup>Earl F. Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East (1968), p. 124.

Situation, Eastern Front  
Spring 1943





Both army groups needed time to rest and refit. In the south, the thaw was beginning and on the central front it would set in during the next few weeks and last through April. To get ready for Citadel by mid-April would be difficult, perhaps impossible.

On 13 or 14 March, Stalin called Zhukov to Moscow to discuss the seriousness of the Wehrmacht successes in the vicinity of Kharkov.<sup>2</sup> One result of their meeting was that he was posted immediately to the area. Arriving the next day and assessing the situation, he called for all available forces from the Headquarters reserve and neighboring fronts. The Supreme Commander gave him three armies, one of which was a tank army. The Germans were stopped just north of Belgorod, and thereafter the situation stabilized.

As late as 12 April, General Headquarters had not decided upon 1943 spring and summer operations in the Kursk sector. Accordingly, the involved fronts assumed the defensive. In mid-April a preliminary decision was made to adopt the deliberate defense; the final decision was made by the Supreme Command in late May. Zhukov's estimate of the Nazi capabilities was amazingly accurate: because of large losses over the 1942-1943 winter campaign, he will be unable to mount a major offensive; because of limited reserves he will be compelled in the spring and early summer to open offensive operations on a narrower front and pursue his prime objective of Moscow by stages. The initial stage being a two-pronged envelopment of Kursk.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>G.K. Zhukov, Marshal, The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov (1971), p. 428.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 432.

Hitler recognized the need for surprise, but little did he or his generals know about the Russian intelligence net. Almost as soon as the ink was dry on the OKW operations orders, the information was electronically on its way via Switzerland to the Stavka in Moscow. The Lucy Ring provided the Supreme Command with details that permitted the Soviets to choose the right course of action for the spring and summer of 1943.<sup>4</sup> A deliberate defense combined with a battle-tested, excellently generated, and well equipped Red Army was to defeat the waning German combat power.

OKH and the generals on the Eastern Front were aware of the ascendancy of the Soviet military might. Manstein, in particular, doubted the wisdom of an offensive; he favored the counterstroke or mobile defense smashing the Russian thrusts by swift manipulation of his armor. He did see possibilities in Citadel but only if an attack was made as soon as practical and against an unprepared Red Army.<sup>5</sup> Guderian, called back to active service in February as Inspector of the Armor Forces, was appalled by the deterioration of the panzer formations--one half of each division's tanks had been transferred to create new panzer divisions. The T-34 had proven itself to be superior to the standard German tanks, the Panzer III and IV. He recommended no strategic offensive at all for 1943.<sup>6</sup>

Hitler himself was squeamish about the operation but decided on

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<sup>4</sup>Geoffrey Jukes, Kursk, the Clash of Armor (1970), pp. 45-47.

<sup>5</sup>R.T. Paget, Manstein (1951), pp. 56-58.

<sup>6</sup>Heinz Guderian, General, Panzer Leader (1952), p. 308.

15 April in Operations Order Number 6 that Citadel was to be executed as Kursk was to be a blazing torch to the world.<sup>7</sup> The God of War's benevolence had run out for Germany. Stalingrad was the first disaster; the Afrika Corps was driven from Tunisia in May 1943; an invasion in the south of Europe was expected; and allied air power had commenced the bombing of industry in the home-land. Leningrad had not fallen, and behind the Eastern Front, the partisan began to tie down substantial forces, some 25 line divisions in 1943. Strategic freedom of action was based upon German reserves; 75% of the Wehrmacht was fighting in Russia.<sup>8</sup> It was therefore necessary to go on the offensive to maintain the initiative and serve notice to the world that Germany had not as yet rolled over.

Citadel was to be launched upon six days notice after the spring thaw. Postponements came again and again: time to deploy forces north of the bulge, heavy rains, and time to equip the divisions with Panthers, Tigers, and Ferdinands--the new medium Panzer V and heavy Panzer VI tanks with the latter being an 88mm self-propelled gun. It was not until 5 July that Hitler gave the green light. In the meantime and unfortunately for the German soldier, the Red Army had prepared a welcome.

#### PLANS AND PREPARATIONS

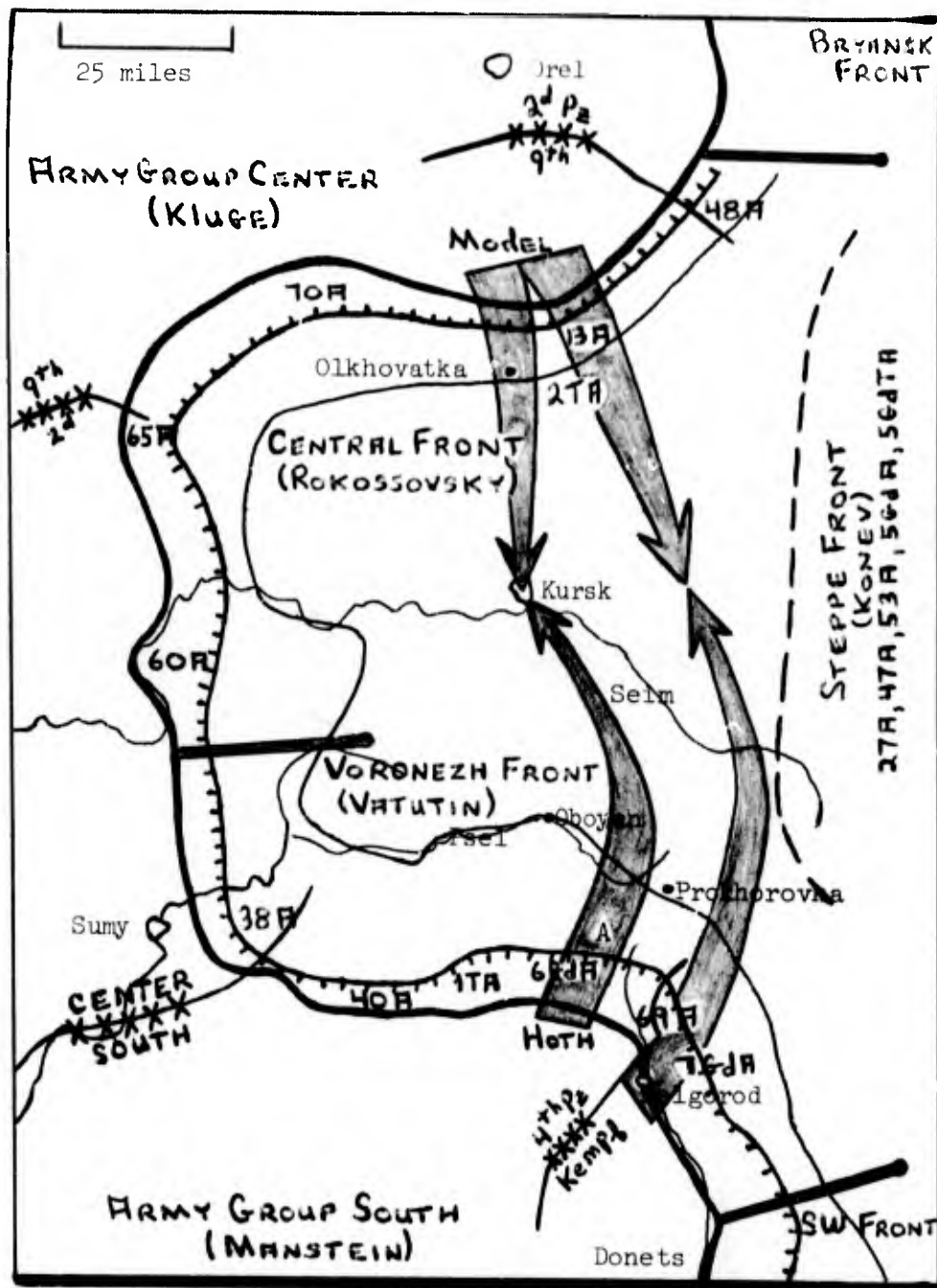
In 1941 Germany invaded Russia on a 1,200 mile front with

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<sup>7</sup>Paul Carell, Scorched Earth (1970), p. 24.

<sup>8</sup>US Military Academy, Dept of Military Art and Engineering, The War in Eastern Europe (1949), p. 94.

Battle Plans, 4/5 July 1943



- Front line and 1st Russian defensive line
- 2d Russian defensive line
- 3d Russian defensive line
- - - Steppe Front defensive line
- A III Mechanized Corps

eleven armies; in 1942 six armies launched the offensive in the south on a 450 mile front; and in 1943 Hitler had to be content with an offensive on a 150 mile front with three armies. But the combat power of these three in 1943 almost equaled the total of 1941 (Barbarossa was launched with 3580 armored vehicles and 1830 aircraft).<sup>9</sup> Practically 3000 tanks and assault guns, around 10,000 guns, over 2000 aircraft, and 900,000 men were concentrated for Citadel. Some of the finest German divisions--3d, 6th, 7th, 11th Panzer, SS Das Reich, SS Leibstandarte Adolph Hitler, and Gross Deutschland were lined up shoulder to shoulder along the eighty miles of attack front. Never before had such a massive force--equipped with the latest tanks--been assembled on such a short frontage.<sup>10</sup>

The plan was not new: a double envelopment behind the salient. In the south, Manstein was to attack with Hoth's IV Panzer Army with Army Detachment Kempf providing east flank security. Army Group Center, commanded by Kluge, was to penetrate the northeast edge of the bulge with Model's IX Army and close the pincers at Kursk. 9th Army deployed six panzer, two motorized, and twelve infantry divisions on a front of about thirty miles; 4th Panzer Army had five panzer, one motorized, and three infantry divisions; and Kempf's Detachment contained three each panzer and infantry divisions. Total attacking forces were 35 divisions of some 570,000 men in the main assault; each pincer had only about fifty

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<sup>9</sup>Carell, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup>Jukes, p. 71.

miles to go to close the salient. How could such a force fail?

Three Soviet fronts opposed the Nazis: in the north half of the bulge, Rokossovsky's Central and in the south, the Voronezh Front commanded by Vatutin with Nikita S. Khrushchev as a member of the military council. To the east in reserve was Konev's Steppe Front. The Russians totaled some 1,337,000 men or outnumbered the Germans by an approximate ratio of 3:2. Combat power figures were: 3300 tanks and assault-guns, over 20,000 guns/mortars/rocket launchers, and 2650 aircraft.<sup>11</sup>

The defense of the salient concentrated huge bodies of troops in and behind it. The Central Front had in its first line five combined armies and one each tank and air army; in the second line or reserve were a cavalry corps and two tank corps. On Model's main axis of assault the Soviets had a superiority of 2:1 in artillery and 7:6 in tanks (1120 versus 960). Vatutin had the same forces except his second line consisted of only one each rifle and tank corps. In his main defensive sector he had 5800 guns as opposed to Manstein's 2500; and the number of tanks was about equal, some 1500 each. Four combined armies, one tank and air army, with three cavalry, two tank and one mechanized corps in reserve comprised the Steppe Front.<sup>12</sup> (Note: A Soviet army was equal to a German corps).

The fires of 19,300 guns and 900 rocket launchers were available

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 78-79.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 53-54.



to counter the massed panzers, and the defense was based on anti-tank strongpoints and minefields. The strongpoints contained guns, anti-tank weapons, mortars, sappers and machine gunners. In front of the belts of strongpoints there were on the average 2400 anti-tank and 2700 anti-personnel mines per mile of front; 400,000 mines, in all, had been laid by the engineers.<sup>13</sup> In the salient the defensive system was up to 110 miles, front to rear, and consisted of six belts. Behind these the Steppe Front manned another system and behind that another line on the east bank of the River Don. In the Central Front alone some 3100 miles of trenches were dug. For all practical purposes, this system was completed by the end of May. The interim of five weeks before the battle was used for improvement, strengthening the Steppe Front, and training the troops.<sup>14</sup> Over 500,000 box cars of supplies were sent to the area. Partisan activity was increased--its principal objective was to destroy the rail net and the Wehrmacht equipment trains.

The wait by the Germans became sickening as they watched and photographed the Red Army prepare a defense in depth. The generals were all too correct in stating that surprise had been lost, but their appeals to Hitler were in vain. The western face of the bulge was lightly held by the Russians; defensive concentrations were along the main attack routes; in fact, two-thirds of the artillery and tanks of each front.<sup>15</sup> Each Soviet army had three

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<sup>13</sup>Ziemke, p. 135.

<sup>14</sup>Jukes, p. 54.

<sup>15</sup>Ziemke, p. 133.

defensive zones, and behind them the fronts had organized two or three more. The prospect for penetration by narrow and widely spaced armored attacks was small.

Manstein shunned the traditional attack by infantry and artillery to make the breach. Instead, Hoth and Kempf were to use their armor in a succession of wedges--Tigers to the front, Panthers and Panzer IVs fanned out diagonally to the rear, infantry following, and at the base heavier forces with mortars in APCs. He hoped to split open the defenses in this way and considered it too dangerous to independently use his armor during the initial stages.<sup>16</sup>

Both Model and Manstein ordered that their forces were to halt under no circumstances but retain their mobility and press on to their objectives. If rendered immobile, fire support was to be given from the static position. If bogged down positionally, the enemy artillery and anti-tank defenses would make mincemeat of the attack and breakthrough would become an impossibility.<sup>17</sup>

The morale of the German troops was high; they were prepared to endure any losses and carry out every task given them. No precautions were omitted; there had been time to make thorough reconnaissance. The fire plan was carefully worked out, and the most conscientious steps were taken to ensure the closest cooperation between air and ground forces. Air photos for every square yard

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<sup>16</sup>Jukes, p. 76.  
<sup>17</sup>Ibid.



of the salient were available, but they did not reveal the details  
the  
or give any indication of/strength of the Russian forces.

The stage for the most concentrated carnage of WWII was set; its scene centered about an ordinary Russian town on a far flung plain with numerous valleys and some rivers and brooks. The roads were tracks of sand, impassable in the rain; large cornfields covered the landscape making visibility difficult. All in all, it was not good tank country but by no means tank proof. On 4 July the weather was hot and sultry, and there was a feeling of tension along the battlefront.<sup>18</sup>

#### BATTLE

Kursk was two separate engagements, south and north of the bulge. The Stavka expected the main German thrust to be from Model's 9th Army. Zhukov modestly explained this incorrect estimate as the reason for the lack of Nazi success against Rokossovsky's Central Front.<sup>19</sup> However, Russian intelligence made no other errors. The Red Army went on the alert on 2 July, having been informed that the offensive would commence sometime between 3 and 6 July. On the evening of the 4th Zhukov learned from Vasilevsky (supervising the southern sector as Zhukov was in the north for the Supreme Commander) that the enemy would attack at dawn on 5 July and that the Voronezh Front would carry out, per the over-all plan, artillery

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<sup>18</sup>F.W. Von Mellenthin, Maj Gen, Panzer Battles (1971), p. 265.  
<sup>19</sup>Zhukov, p. 450.

and air counter-preparations. After 0200 hours on the 5th, General Pukhov, 13th Army commander, told Rokossovsky that a captured sapper had designated roughly 0300 hours as jump-off. The Russian reaction was violent and did not add to the confidence of the already suspicious Germans. Zhukov began the northern portion of "the grand symphony of the great battle at the Kursk Bulge"<sup>20</sup> at 0220 hours--10 minutes before the scheduled German preparation. Rokossovsky's guns engaged about one hundred enemy batteries and temporarily suppressed more than half of them. The German infantry was thrown into confusion; prisoners taken said the Soviet "counter-preparation had come like a bolt from the blue."<sup>21</sup>

At 0430 hours the German barrage began. At first it was weak and disorganized but it gradually increased in force as the batteries damaged by the Soviet bombardment were brought into action. At the same time 300 bomber sorties were launched against the 13th Army. Losses were not significant because of the excellent Russian dispersion and camouflage. Rokossovsky initiated a second counter-preparation during the German bombardment. This time he used one thousand guns, almost double the 600 that had taken part in the earlier barrage.<sup>22</sup>

German reports state that their losses were heavy, but in

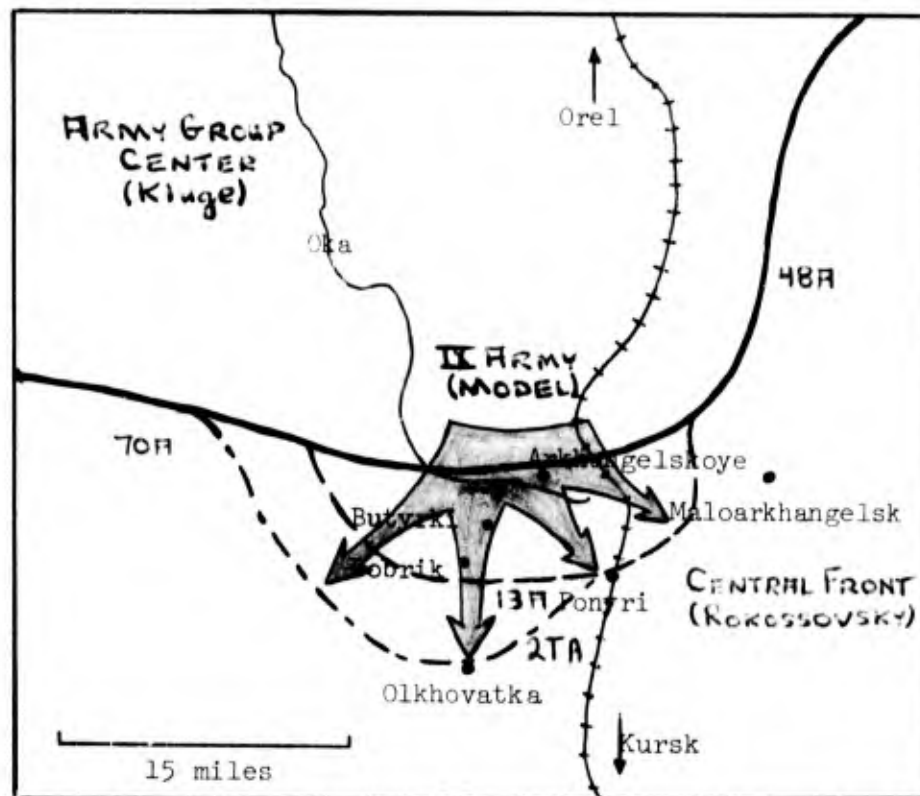
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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 455.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 456.

<sup>22</sup>Jukes, p. 85.

# The Battle in the North



- Front line, 4 July 1943
- - - - - Front line, 5 July 1943
- . - . - Front line, 10 July 1943

retrospect, Zhukov suggests that the Soviet preparation was premature. It would have been far better to have started the fires later, some 30-60 minutes before the actual attack as German infantry were still sleeping in their dug-outs and the panzers were sheltered in waiting areas.<sup>23</sup>

At 0530 hours German tanks and motorized infantry moved out against the Central Front positions; eight divisions attacked the Soviet 13th, 48th and 70th Armies. In fact, this was a diversion to draw Rokossovsky's attention away from 9th Army's main blow. At 0730 another attack was mounted against the left flank of 13th Army and at 0830 hours the main German force with Tigers and Ferdinands, followed by Panzer IVs, and infantry in APCs, moved against the 13th Army.

The Tiger 88s fired shell after shell into the Soviet positions to keep the enemy down. The Russians returned the fire with heavy mortars, safe from low trajectory weapons in their deep trenches. The German engineers, trying to clear the mines, paid the toll. Soviet air mounted incessant attacks--in numbers never before seen on the Eastern Front. Red Army engineers laid about 6000 new mines in 13th Army sector; almost 100 German tanks and SPs were blown up on this first day of battle. At darkness most of the assault force was still enmeshed in the first Soviet defensive belt; a few Tigers were isolated forward. By dawn of the 6th, the German

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<sup>23</sup>Zhukov, p. 457.

infantry, at tremendous cost, had seized most of the first defensive belt. But Soviet snipers seriously hindered mine clearing. By the evening of the 6th, Model had penetrated, at the maximum, six miles into the Soviet zone and at a loss of over 25,000 men killed or wounded and about 200 tanks and tracked vehicles. Nowhere had the Red Army been taken by surprise; the Soviet infantry refused to panic in front of the roaring 700 HP engines of the Tigers. They allowed the monsters to rumble past their well-camouflaged foxholes and then dealt with the following German grenadiers. The Ferdinands were sitting ducks, as German design, to Guderian's chagrin, had failed to arm them with a machinegun; their 88 could not handle the close-in Russians.<sup>24</sup>

By now it was certain that there would be no decisive breakthrough through the strong and deep Soviet defensive zone. This is why Model had based his attack on the assumption of extreme opposition and why he did not let loose his armor but attempted to force the breach systematically. On the 5th his deeply echeloned army had attacked with only one Panzer division in the first wave. On the morning of the 6th, he committed three Panzers into a penetration in the Butyrki and Bobrik area where the Soviet 15th Rifle Division had been torn open. Normally there would have been a breakout, but this was not a normal situation. The Russian defensive system remained intact over a further depth of six to ten miles.<sup>25</sup>

Model's objective was Olkhovatka and Hill 274. Here, a series

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<sup>24</sup>Jukes, pp. 88-89.

<sup>25</sup>Carell, pp. 40-45.

of hills formed the middle section of the Central Russian ridge between Orel and Belgorod. From the highground Kursk, 400 feet below, was visible; Model wanted to seize the ground, bring up his reserves, engage Rokossovsky's armor, defeat it, and thrust onto Kursk to link up with Hoth. Rokossovsky expected this and was ready; he had assembled sufficient and well-positioned reserves. After unsuccessful Soviet counterattacks on 6 July, the Germans were in position on 8 July to commence the assault on the highground. Defensive fires pinned the Germans down; only tanks moved forward into the wall of fire. The Soviet artillery let them come within 400 yards. At that range, even the Tigers were set on fire.<sup>26</sup> Contributing to the German demise was an unusual order by Rokossovsky. 2d Tank Army was to dig in its tanks and defend the line from hull-down positions; use of tanks in the open was authorized, however, against enemy infantry and light armor.<sup>27</sup>

Only the slope of Hill 274 was reached; other hills were gained but lost after Soviet counterattacks. German divisions were bled white; battalions melted to company strength; in one hour a motorized company lost all of its officers killed or wounded.<sup>28</sup> On the night of 10/11 July, Model threw his last reserves into the inferno. The deadlock was not to be broken. Nevertheless, during the day of the 11th he regrouped his forces, moved all his reserves into

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Jukes, p. 91.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

one area, and fixed 12 July as the date for a decisive breakthrough if there was ever to be one.

In the meantime, the Red Army was about to counterattack to Orel in the northwest with the West and Bryansk Fronts. Rokossovsky was also deploying to join in the preplanned counter-offensive set for the 12th.

For three days, 8 through 10 July, an unprecedented tank battle had been waged. During its climax some 1000 to 1200 tanks and assault guns had been employed on each side. Numerous air units and 3,000 guns of all calibers competed in this terrible duel. The "materiel" battle of El Alamein where Montgomery used 1000 guns was modest by comparison.<sup>29</sup> Each army fought as if they knew this was to be the decisive battle of WW II. Only to the south of the bulge would there be conflict more savage and on a greater scale.

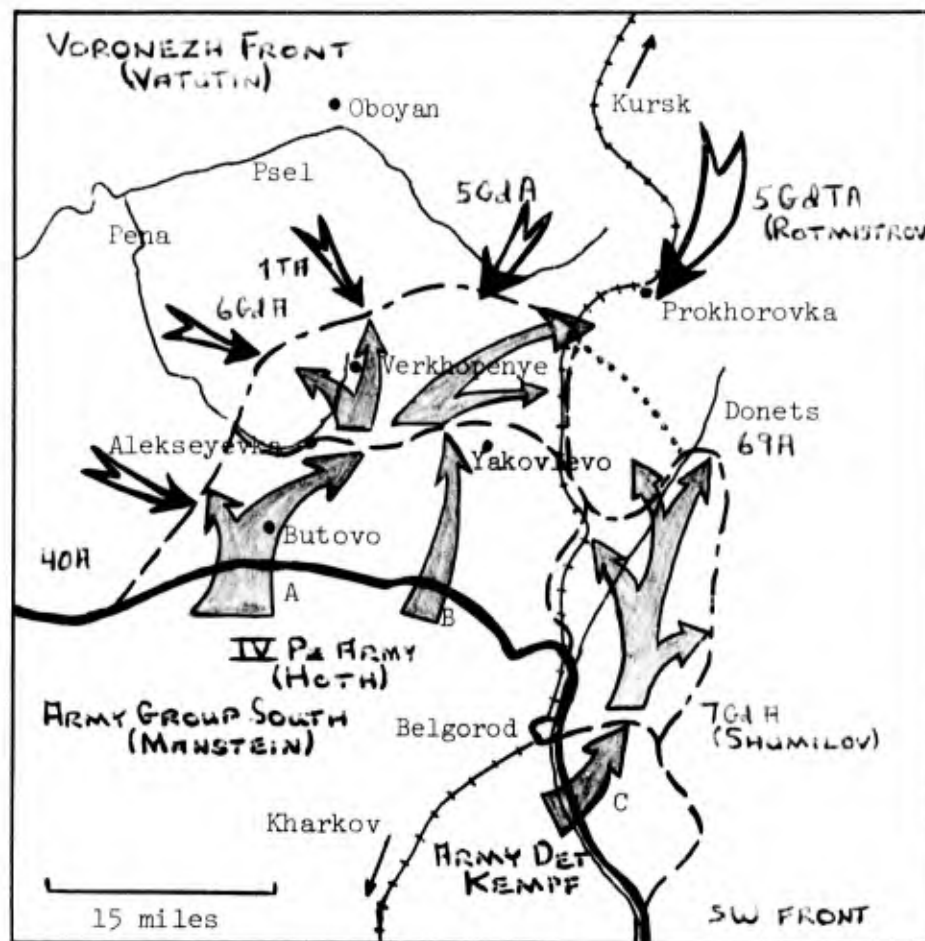
Actually, the Kursk battle began at 1500 hours on 4 July; Hoth's 4th Panzer Army achieved initial success by seizing the high ground just north of the front lines. The main attack was to commence after the artillery preparation scheduled for 0330 on 5 July.

The 6th Guards Army held the lines facing the panzer army; behind it Vatutin, Voronezh Front commander, had placed the magnificently equipped III Mechanized Corps in the Alekseyevka-Yakovlevo area to cover the Kharkov-Oboyan-Kursk highway and the feeder road from Butovo. The Russians anticipated that the Germans would take the

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<sup>29</sup>Carell, pp. 46-48.

# The Battle in the South



- Front line, 4 July 1943
- - - - Front line, 6 July 1943
- . - . Front line, 12 July 1943
- ..... Front line, 15 July 1943
- A 48th Panzer Corps    B II SS Panzer Corps
- C 3d Panzer Corps



most direct route to Kursk. Hoth, on the other hand, calculated that Soviet armored reserves would appear on the battlefield just as he would be crossing the Psel River south of Oboyan or when he was most vulnerable. Therefore, it would be better to defeat the Voronezh Front reserves before pushing on to achieve the link-up with Model. He instructed his staff to wheel the army to the northeast, in the direction of Prokhorovka, from where the Soviets must come, and not directly strike at Oboyan. His estimate was correct; his decision was to have great consequence.

The reason for Manstein's choice of tactics, penetration by armor, was the fact that he had insufficient infantry for his fifty mile front and that, considering the Soviet defense echeloned in great depth, the traditional method was too slow, costly, and unreliable. He hoped that Hoth and Kempf after quickly breaking resistance by concentrations of armor would be able to meet the enemy armored reserves outside of Ivan's prepared positions.<sup>30</sup>

The Soviet recipe for the defense was the same as in the north. In addition to opening the battle with their own artillery, the Russian air armies almost succeeded in destroying the Luftwaffe on the morning of the 5th. Recently installed radar, unknown to the Soviets, gave sufficient warning to the German air crews to get their planes airborne and away from their strips around Kharkov. Throughout almost all of the battle, the Luftwaffe mounted 3000 sorties daily; German Stuka pilots engaged and killed untold numbers of

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 49-53.

Soviet tanks. This contribution was not enough, and as the battle progressed, the Red Air Force was to make use of its air superiority.<sup>31</sup>

The German barrage started on the 5th at 0330 hours; its volume was equal to that of all the artillery shells expended in the campaigns of Poland and France.<sup>32</sup> The Soviet counter-preparation and heavy rains that fell during the night delayed the start of the offensive until 0600 hours and made the terrain a morass. German success, however, was greater than in the north because of Manstein's tactics and Vatutin's relatively lesser combat power. Hoth was able to penetrate the 6th Guards in two places; the 48th Panzer Corps broke through the 67th Guards Rifle Division and headed towards Oboyan; and Hausser's II SS Panzer Corps penetrated the 52d Guards Rifle Division and headed for Prokhorovka. The progress of Army Detachment Kempf was slow. After crossing the Donets south of Belgorod, it had run into a three mile deep belt of fortifications between the river and the railroad. Casualties were alarming, and the troops inched along as they were without air support and were constantly harried by Soviet planes. Kempf's faltering start was to be of later significance, and it pointed to a German weakness throughout Citadel. There was not enough air to go around for simultaneous support of all the ground units. The main efforts of the air units had to be shifted daily and at the expense of over-all air superiority.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Von Mellenthin, p. 273.

<sup>32</sup>Carell, p. 52.

<sup>33</sup>Ziemke, pp. 135-136.

The Russian situation was serious; all front reserves were deployed and the 5th Tank Army and 5th Army, major forces of Konev's Steppe Front, were summoned. This meant a substantial weakening of the counterattack front but the decision was made because if the salient fell there would be no counter-offensive. Khrushchev laid down the law, "either we hold, or the Germans take Kursk."<sup>34</sup>

The 48th Panzer Corps, despite mechanical difficulties with its untried and new Panthers, captured Verkhopenye on 8 July and reached the highground at the Psel river crossings south of Oboyan on the afternoon of the 10th. Now was the time to wheel to the east and to defeat, by a joint effort of the SS Panzer and 48th Corps, the Russian armor. Accomplishment of this required Army Detachment Kempf to hold the ground east of Prokhorovka and to prevent further Soviet tank armies from the Steppe Front reaching the battlefield. Kempf was to have been in position by the 9th but he was not. On the morning of the 11th, the lead elements of 3d Panzer Corps were twelve miles south and on the east bank of the Donets. General Shumilov's 7th Guards Army had held Kempf's rate of advance to a crawl.<sup>35</sup>

Rotmistrov's 5th Guards Tank Army began to arrive in the Prokhorovka area on 9 July; after a move of over 200 miles, he was in no condition to mount an immediate attack. Preparations were made for

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<sup>34</sup>Jukes, p. 97.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 97-100.

an offensive on the 12th by four armies: the chewed up 1st Tank and 6th Guards of the Voronezh Front, and the 5th Tank and 5th Guards from Konev's Steppe Front. German attacks on the 11th forced back the 1st Tank and 6th Guards putting them out of position for the next day's strike. Vatutin, nevertheless, realized the gravity of the situation and ordered the attack before the arrival of reinforcements from Kempf--the German Grouchy.<sup>36</sup>

Early on the morning of 12 July and under the eyes of their commander (Rotmistrov directed his battles from a height overlooking the battlefield), 850 tanks--mostly T-34s--moved out. At the same time 700 German tanks including 100 Tigers advanced from the opposite direction to renew their attack on Prokhorovka. The results are history; it was the swan song of the German armor. Part II of the post-war Soviet film, Liberation, shows Russians and Germans fighting with sticks, the whole sky was overhung with the smoke of burning tanks, and one air battle followed another. Each side lost over 300 tanks; Rotmistrov withdrew in the evening to regroup and left the field to the Germans.<sup>37</sup> It did not matter for the elite of Germany had met their inferiors in a decisive clash of arms, the greatest tank battle in history, that marked the Nazi Waterloo.

Citadel was the decisive battle of the Second World War; the official Soviet history of the war correctly named it as the battle

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<sup>36</sup>Carell, pp. 79-80.  
<sup>37</sup>Jukes, pp. 100-103.

of world historic significance.

#### AFTERMATH

On 12 July, Stalin ordered Zhukov to Prokhorovka; and Model, on Kluge's instructions, had to shift his forces to meet the Russian offensive towards Orel and could not mount his planned breakthrough on the northern Kursk front. On the 13th, Kempf pierced the Russian defenses south of Prokhorovka--it was too late; and Hitler called Manstein and Kluge to East Prussia for an immediate conference. He had decided to end Citadel as the invasion of Sicily on 10 July required additional divisions for Italy. They were to come from Kursk. Kluge agreed; Manstein believed he was on the threshold of victory. He did not know that one-fifth of Army Group South had been destroyed in eight hours nor did he realize the strength of the yet uncommitted Soviet reserves.<sup>38</sup>

The strategic initiative had been lost; it passed to the Russians who advanced beyond the Dnieper by the end of 1943. Almost all the strategic reserve had been or was to be destroyed. The supreme effort and flower of the Wehrmacht had been crushed by the Red Army at a place and time chosen by the German. Stalingrad had been the psychological turning point of the war. Kursk was the military turning point; it sealed the fate of Nazi Germany.

Alexander Werth visited the area shortly after the battle; he

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

described it as:

"a hideous desert, in which even every tree and bush had been smashed by shell-fire. Hundreds of burned-out tanks and wrecked planes were still littering the battlefield, and even several miles away from it the air was filled with the stench of thousands of only half-buried Russian and German corpses."<sup>39</sup>

On the night of 5 August, the first of 355 victory salutes, twelve salvoes from 124 guns, rang out over the Kremlin.<sup>40</sup> The Russian command knew that by winning the Battle of Kursk the Soviet Union had in effect won the war.

#### CONCLUSIONS/LESSONS LEARNED

Two principles of war were violated by the Germans at Kursk. They attacked without surprise and sufficient combat power. Their trump card played into the hands of the Soviets who knew beforehand of practically every enemy move and whose defense was valiantly carried out by the individual Russian soldier, master-minded by experienced generals, and fought with superior and greater numbers of military hardware. The Soviets' well timed counter-offensives were not a result of luck but were a result of the correct appreciation of the situation and their enemy's capabilities. The many "ifs" posed by several German generals after the war have no foundation. All credit is due to the Red Army and its leaders; it had passed beyond its apprenticeship and was ready to wear down its

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<sup>39</sup>Alexander Werth, Russia at War (1964), p. 684.

<sup>40</sup>G.K. Zhukov, Marshal, Marshal Zhukov's Greatest Battles (1969), p. 201.

adversary blow by blow.<sup>41</sup>

In conclusion, it would be of value if each reader were to ask himself whether or not his armed forces have applied--through teaching, training, and/or gaming--the lessons learned from this battle of almost 30 years ago. Of course, these must be considered in view of nuclear/conventional warfare. It should be noted that modern Soviet doctrine does not separate the two. They go hand in hand, and ostensibly the Red Army is trained for both--the key task being a swift transition from one method of action to the other.<sup>42</sup> Some of Kursk's lessons learned, applicable in both nuclear and conventional war and stated as requirements, are:

1. Air superiority and effective ground support.
2. A responsive scientific and technological program to provide the troops in the field with up to date but tested and proven equipment.
3. Close cooperation between engineers and the ground-gaining arms.
4. Large numbers of anti-tank weapons.
5. The application of combat power to include the movement of large forces, the positioning of reserves, and the use of time-distance factors.
6. The ability to correctly pass from the defense to the offense.
7. A reliable intelligence system.

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<sup>41</sup>Ziemke, p. 145.

<sup>42</sup>I. Zavyalov, Lt Gen, "Weapons and Military Art," Soviet Military Review (August 1971), pp. 2-4.

8. A proper appreciation of the situation and the enemy's capabilities.

9. The discipline required to make soldiers reliable in battle. Another is the need for air defense of the field armies--evidently the Russians consider this vital based upon the number of anti-aircraft weapons they have organic to their divisions today. Last but not least is to know your enemy. Major General F.W. Von Mellenthin has provided a singular service by his chapter<sup>43</sup> on the Red Army in his book, Panzer Battles; prophetically he cautions, "do not underestimate the Soviet."



PETER L. THORSEN  
Colonel FA

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<sup>43</sup>Von Mellenthin, pp. 349-367. The author occupied almost every position in the Wehrmacht chain of command. The referenced chapter should be required reading.



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